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Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context

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The authors identify two common components in the flawed decisions they studied: judgment error and the absence of a corrective process. One example given is the case of Matthew Broderick, a retired Marine Corps general who was a seasoned decision maker in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Operations Center during Hurricane Katrina. His experience had taught him that initial reports from a crisis area are often exaggerated and inaccurate. Twelve hours after the hurricane hit New Orleans, Broderick received conflicting information about breached levees and extensive flooding. His rational analysis was that the situation was not dire, and he went home. By the following morning, the magnitude of the catastrophe was unequivocal.

Broderick was a competent leader with proven crisis experience, so why did he assign great validity to one source of information while dismissing data from other credible sources? The authors contend that his misjudgment resulted from two cognitive errors: he incorrectly assumed that the Katrina situation "pattern-matched" his prior crisis experiences; and he exacerbated the error by "emotionally tagging" the information from his preferred source, the Army Corps of Engineers. Pattern recognition and emotional tagging are powerful subconscious influences on decision making.

Based on the authors' research, four "red flag conditions" are evident in defective decisions: misleading experiences, misleading prejudices, inappropriate self-interest, and inappropriate attachments. A red-flag condition forecasts vulnerability to cognitive bias. Notable examples of

flawed decisions made by exceptional military, business, and government leaders richly illustrate the latent peril in red-flag conditions.

The elements at play are subtle and subconscious. For example, the persistent tug of personal self-interest is hard to detect, because a self-serving bias is implicitly acceptable in our culture. Self-interest becomes inappropriate when it is unacknowledged and there is no self-awareness. It corrosively distorts the decision process. The authors' research found that inappropriate self-interest contributed to flawed strategic decisions in more than two-thirds of their research cases.

The book is repetitive at times, but that minor distraction is more than offset by its insightful advice and practical decision-process safeguards. The authors refer extensively to academic cognitive research and challenge the invincibility of "rational and analytic" decision making, especially for leaders in complex situations where information is ambiguous.

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Horner, Charles. *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2009. 224pp. \$34.95

This book connects China's past, present, and future and places them in a larger, evolving context. Horner's work is nothing short of a tour de force of world intellectual history as projected and contested on the canvas that is China. Eloquent and engaging, it is pointed without being overly

judgmental, incorporating an absorbing literature review that is surprisingly cogent, considering the sheer amount of information conveyed.

Horner takes a bold and transparent approach: his “hypothetical history of the future” analyzes the past in the context of contemporary politics and debates, as post-1978 market reforms have opened up intellectual discourse. He explores the international dimensions and domestic discourses of sinology: “China’s intellectual scene is now among the most vibrant in the world, bringing together . . . competing ideas both foreign and domestic.” The author likewise reveals his own intellectual journey. This self-conscious approach is valuable, since perhaps nowhere other than in China has history been so mined, misused, analyzed, exploited—and remained a subject of such fascination and debate.

Horner explores longtime Chinese bureaucratic practices of devising norms and lessons from history, offering examples from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Although all are invoked as positive or negative models today, “What they stand for now is very different from what they were once thought to be.” More broadly, “China once interpreted its own past in light of yesterday’s failures, but now it is coming to a new appreciation of its past in light of today’s successes.” China’s usable past includes long if uneven “maritime and naval traditions” that generated national prestige and support for the ruling regime, supported vigorous shipbuilding and trade, and incorporated Taiwan. It is hard to overlook the relevance, and resonance, of such issues today. In a useful comparative example

of the influence of history, Horner likens Zheng He’s voyages to the Apollo moon landings in the long-term transformations they brought in domestic opinion regarding national capabilities, despite their abrupt terminations.

Strategic debate in the Qing dynasty regarding the value of China’s western territories reveals enduring tensions in its strategic orientation between continental and maritime frontiers and between factions advocating their respective emphases. Horner quotes one official, whose vividly expressed viewpoint carried the day (perhaps to Beijing’s detriment, in retrospect): “The maritime nations are like a sickness of the limbs, far away and light, but Russia is like a sickness of the heart and stomach, nearby and dangerous.”

Horner tackles the enduring puzzle of why China’s leaders failed to anticipate maritime threats from Western powers and finds that the Qing government devoted insufficient attention to diplomacy and intelligence abroad and failed to consult knowledgeable overseas Chinese. Nevertheless, by the dawn of the twentieth century, China’s intelligentsia had achieved a deep understanding of the sources of Western power and “self-understanding.” Significant bureaucratic-curricular reforms proved insufficient, however: a “painful consensus” emerged that “a new intellectual regime . . . would have to consolidate its power before the country’s recovery of national power could begin in earnest.”

Then, as now, there is widespread determination to make China a prosperous great power but uncertainty regarding how to do so. Questions abound: How should China relate to the international system? How should it

work with the existing hegemonic power of the day? Also, to what extent can, and should, Beijing further its interests militarily? Horner sees this as part of a more fundamental question and cites a Chinese intellectual: “Do we Chinese have the possibility or necessity to form our own discourse of modernity, or do we open a ‘branch office’ of the Western discourse of modernity in China”?

I commend this book to general readers in search of intellectually stimulating but accessible material, to teachers of survey courses at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level, and to specialists seeking insights into their own studies of Chinese history.

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Alterman, Jon B., and John W. Garver. *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States and the Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2008. 144pp. \$16.95

In *The Vital Triangle* Jon Alterman and John Garver present a compact analysis of relations among China, the United States, and the countries of the Mideast. Alterman directs the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Garver is a professor of international affairs at Georgia Tech. They deliver a focused, 133-page narrative, peppered with charts illustrating statistical trends in the energy and arms trades. Based on interviews and conferences with scholars in China and the Mideast, a review of English- and Chinese-language secondary literature, and news reporting, this study is the first attempt at a

comprehensive, “three-dimensional” study of Sino-U.S. relations in regard to the vital Middle East.

Most important, the authors explain how Beijing’s keen awareness of its limited power and its recognition of the importance of Sino-U.S. trade significantly restrain Chinese opposition to U.S. Mideast strategy. Despite China’s growing economic stake in the region and declaratory opposition to U.S. “hegemony,” Beijing gives avoiding direct clashes with Washington higher priority than it does its relations with regional states. A key example is China’s decision in 1997 to scale back significantly cooperation with Iran on nuclear and missile technologies in response to pressure from the Clinton administration. The authors demonstrate how Beijing paradoxically combines a practical policy of risk avoidance with the rhetoric of antihegemonic solidarity, allowing China to reap economic and political profits from Western protection of the flow of Mideast energy and, simultaneously, from regional resentments of that same Western intervention. Beijing’s observations of rough Soviet and American experiences in Mideast geopolitics reinforce its belief in the cost-effectiveness of a low regional security profile.

The book concludes with some reasonable, if not exactly groundbreaking, recommendations for managing frictions in the China–United States–Mideast triangle. Of particular interest to the naval community are those focused on securing the maritime domain within the Persian Gulf. Alterman and Garver advocate collaboration among China and Western and Persian Gulf littoral states on ship identification protocols, cargo security initiatives, and multilateral